

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Christ Church Cathedral 01-12-2019

Isa 2: 1-5; Ps 122; Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:36-44

As we begin a new church year, we start hearing Sunday readings from the Gospel of Matthew. Today he presents Jesus warning his disciples to be on the lookout for that day and hour that no one knows, the day when the Son of Man will come like a burglar breaking into a house in the middle of the night.

So, what is all this about? I imagine that the early believers in Jesus must have been sick and tired of people saying to them, 'How can you claim that he was the Messiah?' The Messiah is supposed to usher in the golden age, they would have said, the wonderful new era when God will set right everything that is wrong in the world, when soldiers will beat their swords and spears into farming implements because there will be no need for weapons any more. But as far as we can see, it's business as usual. Nothing has changed.'

It would have been difficult to argue with that. But those early believers, trying to work out the implications of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, turned to the Scriptures. We know that, because their writings are so full of quotations from them. One of their favourite passages that crops up all over the New Testament was from Psalm 110:

The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand

Until I make your enemies your footstool.

We see this sort of thing in ancient Near Eastern sculptures, where vanquished warriors lie prostrate before an enthroned king with his foot pressing down on their necks.

Just like us whenever we say the creed, the early believers professed that Jesus, raised from death, is 'seated at the right hand of the Father' and that this is where he will be until everything that distorts God's design for the creation is rectified, until all those powerful forces in the world that are opposed to God end up under his feet. Then Jesus will come again in glory to declare the full establishment of God's reign in the world. Meanwhile, we who are Jesus' followers are living in a situation that is defined by that little word 'until.' During Advent, our scripture readings will suggest how we should live in this interim period. First, we must stay awake, or if we have fallen asleep it is high time for us to wake up. We must be alert to the fact

that our present situation could end when we least expect it. Second, we must be active, doing everything we can to bring our lives as individuals, families, societies and nations into line with God's intentions. Third, we must be patient, never losing hope that God's good will towards our world will ultimately prevail.

When Jesus and the early Christians spoke about the present age being a prelude to a new age of God's reign, they were drawing on a long tradition of Jewish preaching and writing intended for people going through hard times. The Jews certainly had their share of hard times, crushed as they were under the heel of a series of harsh conquerors, of whom Rome was simply the most recent. An Israelite sage or visionary wanting to encourage them would reassure them that, although things might look chaotic, God had not forgotten them; that even though the future is known to God alone, God had given him a glimpse of a glorious turn-around for Israel. And now he was passing this revelation on to the people. Once they heard about the dramatic intervention in their favour that God had in mind, they would be convinced that, contrary to all appearances, God was in control of history, that the age in which they lived was moving unstoppably towards the new age of God's definitive reign. In fact, the tough times they were going through were something positive, like a woman's labour pains that precede a new birth. So, this difficult time that tested their faith was actually the proof that the new age was about to dawn. Because these prophets were revealing things known only to God, we call their writings apocalyptic, a word that simply means uncovering or unveiling something hidden, in other words, a revelation.

The people who recorded such revelations were gifted creative writers. They used their God-given imagination to get their message across in a dramatic way, weird and wonderful at times, full of cryptic features that created a sense of mystery. Frequently they would take the historical events that had so drastically affected the small nation of Israel and project them onto a large screen, as it were, so that the tough times Israel was going through appeared as earth-shattering events, convulsions in nature of cosmic proportions. And then, correspondingly, God's promised restoration of Israel would be nothing less than a new creation of the whole world.

The sayings of Jesus, especially when he talks about 'The kingdom of God' place him firmly in this tradition. The prayer that he taught his disciples says, 'Your kingdom come.' And the line in it that we translate, 'Lead us not into temptation' really means, 'Do not subject us to the final test' (NAB); spare us the worst of that time of trial that we know has to precede the eventual full establishment of God's reign.

This is exactly what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading. In the tradition of the apocalyptic visionaries, he compares the day of the coming of the Son of Man to the days of Noah. It is the element of surprise that he stresses. He doesn't fault the people of Noah's day for the gross sinfulness that we read about in Genesis. What he does find fault with is their complete lack of awareness of the impending disaster. 'They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage' and they hadn't a clue that a world-wide flood that would sweep them all away was about to be unleashed.

One of our priests here at the cathedral, the Revd Canon Professor John Bartlett, has over the last three years been putting each Sunday's gospel reading into rhyme and illustrating it with a simple line drawing, as a form of meditation on the Scriptures. (We look forward to the current liturgical year's gospels from Matthew being available in booklet form soon). He has given me a sneak preview—a revelation—of the illustration for today's gospel. It shows two fellows taking it easy, enjoying a pint at an outdoor table, completely oblivious to what is going on behind them: a poor unfortunate being swept away by an absolute tsunami of a flood.

When I was preparing this sermon, I was thinking of being a little bit snifty about the way people nowadays use the word apocalyptic to describe floods, earthquakes or extreme weather events. This is not quite correct, I was going to say, because to describe something as apocalyptic really means to say that it is a revelation. Then I was stopped in my tracks! This week we had the dire warnings of the International Panel on Climate Change that we are nowhere near to reducing carbon emissions to a safe level. And this news was illustrated with images of wildfires, floods, melting polar ice, landslides, and something that I found particularly sad, the beautiful Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe totally dried up. It dawned on me that apocalyptic is the perfect word for these scenes because they are a revelation of the damage that we have been doing to our common earth home since the Industrial Revolution.

In Thursday's newspaper we were told that here in Ireland climate change accounts for between 2 and 4 per cent of all the news in the main national titles and that only about 14% of that presents it as real and requiring urgent action.¹ We are just like the two laid-back beer drinkers in John's drawing: taking it easy, with our backs to the evidence for the impact of climate change on those least resourced to cope with it.

In the season of Advent, the Church's liturgy speaks to us about the three comings of Jesus: past, present and future. The wake-up call that I hear in

¹ Seán McCárthaigh, 'Irish coverage of climate change low by EU standards, study says' in *The Irish Times*, Thursday 28 November 2019, p. 13.

today's gospel is just an example of how one person has experienced the coming of Jesus in the present. For me, the ecological crisis is a call to wake up, to be proactive and, importantly, I think, not to lose hope. Some of you may have heard what I heard. Some of you may have heard something quite different. Whatever struck you when you listened to the Scriptures, hold on to it. Bring it with you into the week ahead because that is Advent for you; that is the coming of Jesus to you today. Whatever we have heard, let us all be grateful for the way the Holy Scriptures, these ancient texts from a world so different to ours, can speak to us so pointedly and powerfully in our world today.

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